

***The
A. F. of L.
in 1931***

By A. J. Muste

***C. P.
L. A.***

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THE CONFERENCE FOR PROGRESSIVE LABOR ACTION is an organization of militants which roots itself in American soil and seeks to face the realities of American life. It helps the workers in their daily struggles for bread and justice, against injunctions, Yellow-Dog contracts and official brutality. It seeks to stimulate in the existing and potential labor organizations a progressive, realistic, militant labor spirit and activity. It aims to inspire the workers to take control of industry and government, abolish the present capitalist system and build a workers' republic, and an economic system operated for the benefit of the masses and not of the few.

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CONTENTS

Preface	5
CHAPTER I. Membership	7
CHAPTER II. Unemployment Program ...	10
CHAPTER III. "We Look to the Bankers" ..	15
CHAPTER IV. Organizing the Unorganized	20
CHAPTER V. Good-bye Workers' Education	24
CHAPTER VI. Confession of Faith.....	28

PREFACE

THE recent convention of the A. F. of L. was its fifty-first. It was therefore the opening convention of the second half century of the Federation's existence. It was held in the midst of a severe economic depression, and amid changes referred to as "revolutionary," even by conservative spokesmen at the convention. This convention met, however, about as far as possible away from the center of American working-class life, namely, in Vancouver, British Columbia. Pleas to change the meeting place in face of the critical situation had proved unavailing. Were the leaders of the A. F. of L. afraid that the delegates would have been thrown into too radical a mood if they had met in the midst of the unemployment and poverty of some great Eastern or Mid-Western industrial center? Is this choice of meeting place symbolic of the way in which the A. F. of L. is playing around on the outer edges of its task instead of boldly meeting it this winter?

The present brief summary and interpretation of the proceedings of the Vancouver convention will confine itself to what appear to be the most significant activities and trends, namely, membership figures; the unemployment program of the A. F. of L.; organization work, including the tendency to seek advancement by legislation rather than by economic action; the collapse of the Workers Education Bureau; and finally, the present philosophy of the A. F. of L.

CHAPTER I

Membership

A. F. of L. membership for 1931, according to the Executive Council's report, stands at 2,889,550, which is a loss of 72,546 from the previous year. The loss is not in itself a large figure, in view of economic conditions such as usually make for a drop in trade union membership. It must be remembered, however, that the membership figures are padded. The United Mine Workers, for example, are still credited with 400,000 members, although they do not have more than 150,000 dues-paying members at the present time. It is significant also that there was virtually no increase in A. F. of L. membership during the great boom of 1924-29.

Large losses in membership are reported by some of the larger unions which have been the conservative backbone of the A. F. of L. Thus, the barbers' union reports a 10 per cent loss; the longshoremen 14 per cent; street railway employes a loss of approximately 6,000 members,

and the teamsters a loss of nearly 7,000 members. There may be some connection between the membership loss in these last two organizations and the fact that W. D. Mahon and Daniel Tobin, the respective heads of these unions, surprised everybody by advocating compulsory unemployment insurance on the floor of the recent convention.

On the face of this year's returns the building trades' unions do not seem as yet to have been affected seriously, only the painters reporting a loss of 10,000 members or about 9 per cent. It is likely, however, that in the case of at least some of the building trades' unions the figures are not accurate.

The greatest drop in membership is reported by the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, who have lost 21,700 members, or nearly 20 per cent. This is significant from various angles. The loss is suffered by a union which has had a comparatively vigorous and progressive organizing policy in recent years. It reflects the extent to which mergers and labor-saving devices are cutting into the jobs of white-collar workers. It reflects also the tendency of such forces to cut down employment on the railroads. In 1929 there were 360,000 fewer workers on class A railroads in this country than in 1920, and in 1931 there was a

drop of over 700,000 from 1920. It is easy to see why the movement for the five-day week is gaining momentum among the railroad workers.

The only important gains in membership for this year, except for the hod carriers and building laborers, were registered by the organizations of workers employed in federal service, the federal employes' union reporting a 13 per cent increase, the letter carriers 15 per cent and the postoffice clerks a similar increase. This growth in membership among workers for the government, while union membership in private employment is decreasing, is a matter of considerable significance. We must remember that among the shop craft unions in the metal trades there is a tendency to concentrate on the unionization of workers in the government service, and that the railroad workers constitute another group working under special government regulation, although not directly in the employ of the government. The growth of importance in the Federation of these elements will doubtless mean an increasing tendency to seek gains by legislation (which in the A. F. of L. means lobbying, seeking favors from the old parties) rather than by direct action. These elements will reinforce the cautious and "responsible" trends in the Federation, rather than the militant.

CHAPTER II

Unemployment Program

With at least 6,000,000 workers in the United States unemployed and many more on such short time that their wages are insufficient to support them and their families, thousands of workers losing their homes, hundreds of thousands dependent on charity for a living—what is the program of “the Parliament of Labor” for meeting the emergency?

The emergency program for immediate action submitted to and adopted by the convention includes nine points:

1. Maintenance of the wage level. The Executive Council presented some very interesting figures, pointing out the failure of increases in real wages to keep pace with increases in productivity in recent years. Thus “real wage rates advanced 4.2 per cent from 1899 to 1919, compared to the 26 per cent advance in productivity, and 36 per cent from 1919 to 1929 compared to the 54 per cent advance in productivity.” Another

section of the report points out “that while wages were increasing from 1923 to 1929 only from \$11,000,000,000 to \$11,421,000,000, corporation dividends were increasing during the same period from \$930,648,000 to \$3,478,000,000—and interest paid to bondholders was increasing from \$2,469,000,000 to \$7,588,000,000.”

2. Shorter Hours. On this point also the Council submitted some interesting figures. For example, “because of the increase in productivity in manufacturing industry, work which took the average man a 59 hour week in 1899 could be done in 47 hours in 1919, but the work week in manufacturing was actually shortened only from 59 to 52 hours. In 1929 work which took the average man a 52 hour week in 1919 could be done in 34 hours, but the work week in manufacturing was actually shortened only to 50 hours. That is, an 18 hours decrease in necessary work time was compensated by only a two hour decrease in actual work hours.”

3. Employers should determine the minimum number of workers they can keep on the payroll in the next few months and then immediately inform these workers that their jobs are secure. It is expected that these workers will then feel free to spend money, which will create demand

for the products of other workers and thus reduce the number of unemployed.

4. It is suggested that each employer might take on additional workers. If each of the 3 million employers, outside of the farmers, were to take on two additional workers each, the unemployment problem would be solved. The Executive Council recognizes that some small employers could not take on a couple of additional people, but suggests that larger employers could take on a considerable number.

5. Public works should be extended. It is estimated that an additional 100,000 men might be put to work in this way.

6. Employment exchanges should be improved.

7. Arrangements should be made to refuse working cards to young people, keeping them in school, while giving their jobs to adults.

8. Preference is to be given to workers with dependents.

9. Adequate relief must be provided from private or public funds for workers for whom jobs cannot be found.

With many items in this emergency program there will not be much quarrel. Some of them are perhaps a bit naive as, for example, the sug-

gestion that if each of the 3 million employers in the country would take on one or two additional workers, the employment problem would be solved! The real criticism, however, is that the suggestions are not concrete; they do not face real issues; and no adequate machinery and forces are suggested for putting these general proposals into effect.

For example, wage rates are to be maintained. As President Green put it in one of his addresses at the convention: "The A. F. of L. will stand as a Rock of Gibraltar against any effort to reduce wages!" This statement comes, however, from leaders who in 1929 trusted the "honor" of President Hoover, the bankers and the industrialists not to cut wages, who for a year and a half after the depression still contended that this "promise" not to cut wages was being kept, and who have not initiated or led a single important battle of the workers against wage reductions. Their pronouncements against wage reductions mean just exactly nothing for the great mass of workers. It is possible that the A. F. of L.'s stand has been of some value to the exceedingly small percentage of workers in such trades as building and printing.

Again, more work is to be provided through public undertakings, but there is no suggestion

as to where the money is to come from, and proposals for a special session of Congress to vote a "prosperity loan," for example, were voted down by the convention.

Employment agencies are to be strengthened and improved—an excellent suggestion. The A. F. of L., however, only very mildly rebukes President Hoover for vetoing the Wagner Bill which aimed to set up an adequate system of employment exchanges. It thanks the President for having placed in charge of his own utterly inadequate substitute, Brother John R. Alpine, former head of the Plumbers' Union, and ex-member of the A. F. of L. Executive Council. In other words, criticism on the main issue is silenced in exchange for jobs for a few "labor skates."

Adequate relief must be provided, but the A. F. of L. is backing up Hoover's policy of contending that such relief can come largely from private agencies, and of bleeding the workers who still have jobs, in order to create funds out of which to furnish a "dole" to workers who are unemployed. There is not a single suggestion about using relief work in such a way as to educate the people in a labor point of view, or to advance a labor program.

CHAPTER III

"We Look to the Bankers"

If this be official labor's emergency program, what is proposed in regard to the prevention of unemployment in the future and the reform of an economic system which has brought the workers in the richest nation on earth to the sorry pass in which they find themselves today? At this point the A. F. of L. Executive Council is in the fashion, for it talks about planned production. It asks Hoover again to call a national economic conference, at which various groups may discuss the coordination of economic development. It proposes "public accounting on the facts of business, which should be filed with the federal government and compiled there," the reports to be open to responsible organizations. It suggests a Federal Labor Board to gather and disseminate information of interest to workers, as the Department of Agriculture does for the farmers and the Department of Commerce for business men.

While some of this talk seems imposing, it is not much more than talk, and that of a most tentative and timid kind. The Federation is not so bold as to suggest that actual economic planning on a national or international scale should begin immediately. "We do not yet know enough to plan the agencies or chart functions of economic control. We do, however, know that national economic conferences will disclose the way. We have therefore repeatedly urged upon the President of the United States that he call a national economic conference to find a way forward." It is not the intention apparently that the proposed Federal Labor Board should have any power to compel business to be guided by the information the Board might discover about economic conditions. "It need have only the authority to make facts public in order to render service and have effective influence."

Above all, there is no suggestion that labor should rule the world, should take in hand the economic system which the bankers and the industrialists have so nearly brought to disaster. The various factors in production—the group which supplies capital, the group which supplies credit, that which does the buying, that which plans production, that which sells the product and that which does the work—all are to get together and

to plan jointly for a balanced economy. Even among these groups the Federation does not really look to labor to take the lead. It still appeals to the common sense and the good will of capitalists to keep up wages. In a whining tone it says that to cut the already inadequate wages of the worker "would be a most sorry expression of appreciation" from financiers and bosses.

The whole key to the A. F. of L.'s approach to the situation is given, though the Executive Council may not have realized it when that sentence was penned, in these words: "We look to the bankers to be concerned to increase the amount of money put to buying uses, and no group spends its income more freely than wage earners." Ours is a labor movement which "looks to the bankers!"

In spite of all this, economic conditions and the suffering they are bringing upon the workers, forced more progressive attitudes at some points. Nowhere was this more dramatically illustrated than in the debate and in the vote on unemployment insurance. Matthew Woll's Resolution Committee brought in a report against the measure which contained a vicious attack upon "the dole," as he prefers to call it, following the fashion of his pals, the bankers and the insurance magnates. Said the Resolutions Committee's

report (unquestionably written or dictated by Woll): "In return for a slice of bread—a mess of pottage as it were—the workers are being asked by the promoters of compulsory unemployment insurance in the United States to yield up their birthright, to practically surrender in their struggle for liberty, by enactment of legislation deliberately calculated to give the employers increased power of control over the workers."

Nevertheless, a large number of voices were raised on the floor of the convention in favor of unemployment insurance, including, as we have already mentioned, those of prominent and, usually, conservative trade union leaders such as W. D. Mahon, the head of the Street Railwaymen's Union, and Daniel Tobin, head of the Teamsters Union, and former treasurer of the A. F. of L. Reports indicate that there was a moment when the majority of the delegates might actually have been swung in favor of unemployment insurance, but for the impassioned plea of President Green to abide by the traditional A. F. of L. policy of "voluntarism." Green promised, if the A. F. of L. did not reverse its stand in the matter, to go to Congress and demand "millions, yes billions, for relief." He ventured also to assert that unless conditions radically changed, some form of permanent relief against unemployment

must be devised. We are "traveling fast toward it but the time has not yet arrived." This is in startling contrast to the situation one year ago at the Boston convention, when few voices, and no important ones, were raised for the measure, and when there was only a scattering vote against the Resolutions Committee's report.

CHAPTER IV

Organizing the Unorganized

For fifty years the A. F. of L. has had as its fundamental policy, emphasis on "pure and simple trade unionism." "Organize the workers into unions of their crafts and trades": that has been its slogan. Everything else it has regarded as a side-line. It is by its success in organizing workers into unions, therefore, that the A. F. of L. may most fairly be judged. One might expect a great deal of attention to the subject in the report of the Executive Council and in the proceedings of the convention. If there is still anyone who does expect this, he is in for a sad disappointment. None but the most perfunctory resolutions on organizing work were introduced; the Committee on Organization had no important concrete plans to propose; and there was no discussion whatever from the floor on the Committee's report.

As for the Southern organizing campaign, begun with a great fanfare of trumpets in 1929,

one must now ask "Where, oh where, has my little dog gone?" The Conference for Progressive Labor Action pointed out, when this campaign began, that it could succeed only on certain conditions. The campaign, namely, must be a militant one, appealing to the courage of the workers rather than to the favors of the boss. It must be widespread, carefully planned, providing adequate relief and legal aid machinery, and drawing in the help of the progressives and the militants in the movement. When practically everyone of these considerations was ignored in the conduct of the campaign, the C.P.L.A. for a time refrained from direct attack, in order that the A. F. of L. might have no excuse for saying that it would have succeeded if only the "reds" had not interfered. We spoke out at last after the disgraceful ending of the Danville strike. The present Executive Council's report contains only a couple of sentences referring to the Southern campaign in the most perfunctory fashion. It states that this campaign "has been continued." That is a sorry bluff. The fact is that the A. F. of L. has forgotten all about its one great organizing effort of the last decade.

It seems clear that whatever aggressive official moves the A. F. of L. may make in the immediate future will be in the field of legislation, rather

than in the field of direct trade union organization. The railroad organizations are going to Congress for legislation for a shorter work week. The United Mine Workers of America, an organization which has traditionally distrusted resort to legislative action, is to seek legislation for the establishment of a coal commission to regulate the coal industry, as the Interstate Commerce Commission does the railroads, as a first step in an attempt at rehabilitation of the miners' union. The Federation as a whole will put much effort behind the bill to regulate injunctions in labor disputes.

It is doubtless inevitable that there should be a certain tendency to resort to political action in a time of economic depression, when it is hard to make gains as to wages or hours by direct action in the shop. The tendency is, however, indicative of a development away from militancy, which has been going on in the A. F. of L. for a long time. In the present convention, talk about defying injunctions, in which even Matthew Woll has sometimes engaged in the past, was definitely soft-pedalled. Legislative action on the part of the A. F. of L. means in practice lobbying, seeking favors from the dominant political parties.

It seems that if members of A. F. of L. unions are going to be forced to seek redress through

legislation, that is political action, for some of the greater ills from which they suffer, if thus they begin to think more in political and less in pure and simple trade union terms, the result must eventually be to stimulate the movement for the building of a labor party. It is significant, however, that in an A. F. of L. convention held in a time of most severe economic depression, not a single word in favor of independent political action was spoken, and that the A. F. of L.'s non-partisan political program was adopted without dissent. There is no indicator here of any mass movement among organized workers toward a labor party.

CHAPTER V

Good-bye Workers' Education

Of minor importance, perhaps, but nevertheless of special interest to many progressive laborites, is the action of the Vancouver convention in regard to workers' education. When in the Spring of 1929 the Workers Education Bureau of America was made a mere mouthpiece of the Executive Council and of international unions with no real interest in education, instead of a voluntary cooperative association of labor colleges and classes, educators, and unions interested in workers' education, which it had originally been, we prophesied that there would never be another convention of the Workers Education Bureau, that genuine workers' education under official trade union auspices was on the way to the graveyard, and that that was the precise purpose of Matthew Woll and his colleagues in fundamentally changing the constitution of the Bureau. They took the corpse to Vancouver for burial!

It is true that Spencer Miller, Jr., secretary of the W. E. B., estimated in his eloquent address to the convention, that thousands of workers throughout the country have been brought in touch with workers' education through classes, institutes, chautauquas, etc. He implies that all this was done through the activities of the Bureau, though it is well known to all who are working in the field that these activities are rapidly approaching the zero point. The Executive Council's report on the matter is much more modest. It occupies barely a page; it points to the conference of a handful of trade union officials and of professors of economics held at the State University of New Jersey last June as the outstanding achievement of the year in the workers' education field.

The convention's Committee on Education recommended, for one thing, that state federations of labor get in touch with state universities for the working out of adult education programs. Thus whatever adult educational work goes on, in connection with these federations, will be university extension work rather than labor education, in the proper sense of the term.

However, the most important recommendation of the Committee on Education was that "the most effective manner of giving education its

proper place among the working policies of the Federation would be to coordinate these various educational activities now carried on by the Federation through the Permanent Committee on Education and the Workers Education Bureau, into a unified whole." It, therefore, authorizes the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. "to coordinate and consolidate all such activities." In other words, all pretense is now abandoned; the Workers Education Bureau as a separate organization is to go out of existence. This Bureau, of whose executive committee Matthew Woll was the chairman, is to be "coordinated" with the Permanent Committee on Education of the A. F. of L., of which the good Matthew is also chairman, and all those familiar with the situation know what that means. "The young lady from Niger" disappears, and the "smile is on the face of the tiger."

Workers' education which aims to give workers the facts about our present political and economic system, which leaves them free to discuss any subjects of concern to them and to the movement, which trains them for effective service in all branches of the labor movement, and inspires them with a passion for building a new and just economic order, will have to be done in the future, as it is now being done, by agencies which are

independent or semi-independent of the official trade union movement, such as the various summer schools for women workers, Commonwealth, Brookwood and the schools conducted by labor political or other groups.

CHAPTER VI

Confession of Faith

Approximately, at the beginning of the second half century of its activity, the Executive Council devotes considerable space in its report to setting forth the fundamental philosophy of the A. F. of L., the faith which guides and inspires it in these troubled and momentous days. What is that philosophy?

Before we answer that question, it may be well to recall that the preamble of the A. F. of L. constitution, which sets forth the philosophy which in general guided the Federation in its earlier days, begins as follows: "Whereas a struggle is going on in all the nations of the civilized world between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling masses if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefit. . . ."

We must not conclude that the A. F. of L.

was once a revolutionary organization. Yet in pre-war days it had, on the whole, a distinctive labor point of view, regarded itself as in opposition to the dominant political and business forces, and tried to organize the workers primarily by appealing to them rather than to the good will of the boss.

Since the war, a radically new point of view has established itself, though it can legitimately be argued that this point of view is a logical development from tendencies previously operative in the labor movement. There is no mention in the present Executive Council's report of any opposition of interest between employers and workers. On the contrary, "mutuality of interest" among all groups in the community—capitalists, bankers, bosses, workers, salesmen, consumers—is emphasized. The conclusion of the A. F. of L. Executive Council's report, as it faces this winter of suffering, of world-wide political and economic upheaval, is not a call to battle, but a vague and pious suggestion that "the problems that lie ahead require coordination of effort, and the application of the principles of balanced progress toward prosperity, national and international. Upon each group constituting the whole of any joint enterprise or problem rests responsibility for organizing to take part in meeting the

situation upon a basis of mutual interests. Every group must organize not for exploitation or selfish interest, but for advancement as a part of the whole undertaking."

The union, according to this new philosophy, is not primarily a fighting force to defend the workers and advance their interests. On the contrary, "the basic contribution of the union is to supply industry with an agency that will direct labor thinking and policies in accord with constructive principles.—It is an agency through which an important element in production can make intelligent and ordered progress and make its relationships with management constructive, adjusting as industry develops."

The report repeatedly advances the argument that labor ought to be given recognition and its interests safeguarded on the ground that the worker also is "a business man." Thus, it is pointed out that in early days "workers had two economic weapons—the strike and the boycott. Our early labor conflicts were contested fiercely. We found warfare not only wasteful, settling nothing, only postponing necessary concessions and agreements. We began to develop a constructive program for the under-privileged. . . . We believe that all human beings should order their lives so as to make the greatest possible

progress. In a very definite sense this is the business of the wage earner. He should conduct this business in the most efficient way, and his success should have public approval just as do the achievements of the successful business man."

Surely there is an element of comedy as well as tragedy in this attempt to dignify the laborer by making him out to be a business man, at the very time when the majority of our critics, even conservative ones, are fed up on the business psychology, and when business men have plunged mankind into unexampled chaos and distress.

We protest against this theory of "mutuality of interest" and this mouthy twaddle about "balanced progress." There is no mutual interest between the bankers, the corporation executives, the politicians, and the worker on whose back they ride, from whom they take the fruit of his toil, whom they use as machine fodder in times of peace and cannon fodder in times of war. It would be just as reasonable to talk about mutuality of interest between the slave-owner and the slave, between the feudal baron and the wretched serf who dug in his fields and was tied like an ox to his estate.

It is the business of the labor movement to see clearly the fundamental cleavage between the ex-

plaiter and the exploited, to organize the workers for protection against the evil results of an exploitive economic system and for eventual liberation from it. That business the official leaders of the A. F. of L. have almost completely abandoned, though there are unions which still, in some measure, carry it on. The A. F. of L. will have to come back to the business of fighting for the workers rather than serving as personnel agencies for the boss, or it will not get very far past its fifty-first milestone.

